TOWARDS A DESCRIPTION OF THE PROTAGONIST IN THE FICTION OF ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN

by

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Abstract

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An analysis of two novels shows that the effort of the main protagonist is to maintain his moral integrity in the face of a threat stemming from materialist ideology. The protagonist consistently presents three features in his history, and four features in his response to the problem of the novel. In Solzhenitsyn's shorter fiction, protagonists who have the same background characteristics are successful in the same struggle; those who do not, are not. The central theme of this body of literature is the possibility of maintaining one's subjective integrity in the face of some unique 20th century problems: concentration camps, powerful bureaucratic organizations, and the absence of traditional religion.

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Supervisor's Title; Professor of Russian

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my Grandfather, Chaim J. Steinman.

Acknowledgement

The sine qua non of this work has been the tireless advice, criticism, and encouragement of my advisor, Professor Krystyna Pomorska.

Introduction

This paper will consider the fiction of Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, including two novels, one novella, and six short stories. Works which are basically historical--August 1914, and Lenin in Zurich--or documentary--The Gulag Archepelago--will be excluded.

Chapter one will examine the novels, to elicit the construction which is common to both, and with particular attention to the main protagonists. Features which these characters share in both novels will be sought. Chapter two will examine the shorter works, and compare their protagonists to the novels'. Chapter three will conclude with a discussion of the implications of this Solzhenitsyn hero, in view of the larger issues referred to in his writings.

Solzhenitsyn has referred to the construction of his novels as "polyphonic."[1] They have a parallelistic structure, in contrast with a traditional novel, in which there is an apparent story line that leads directly to an identification of the central character. Because of their structure, the identity of this character is not immediately obvious in Solzhenitsyn's novels. Therefore the aim of the analysis in chapter one will be to define precise criteria for selecting and describing the main protagonist; this analysis will include a discussion of time and space factors which are crucial to the narrative technique.

Once this is done, and the features of the main protagonist are

[1] Edward J. Brown, "Solzhenitsyn's Cast of Characters," Major Soviet Writers: Essays in Criticism, ed. E. J. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 357.

defined, chapter two will determine in what way the function of the hero in the novels is varied to produce the main character of the shorter works. Selecting this character will be a straightforward task.

Having considered the construction of the novels, the function of their main protagonists, and the variation of this function in other works, it will be possible to establish, in chapter three, the thematic dominant of Solzhenitsyn's fiction.

Chapter One: The Novels

Two novels by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn were published in the West in 1968: The First Circle,[1] and Cancer Ward.[2] Neither has yet been permitted in the Soviet Union. The structure of both novels is essentially the same. The elements of this analysis will be the time and place of events narrated, the organization of the events, the relationships among the characters, the history of the characters, and the morality, or lack of it, in the decisions they make. The central concept of the analysis, applicable to both novels, will be the struggle of an individual to maintain his inner integrity as a human being, in the face of some threat, and in the context of his existence as a member of society.

To demonstrate this, consider first the duration in time of the narrated action itself. In The First Circle, the story begins on Christmas Eve, 1949, and continues for three consecutive days. In Cancer Ward, there are two episodes, each lasting one week. Part one begins Thursday evening, February 3, 1955; part two begins Saturday, March 5, 1955. In both, the short time duration of the narrative has the consequence that there is no time for development of the characters themselves to occur. There are, throughout the narratives, numerous interruptions, in which information may be presented directly by the narrator, as a recollection in the mind of a character, or in conversation among the characters.

[1] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The First Circle, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Bantam, 1969).

[2] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Cancer Ward, trans. Nicholas Bethell and David Burg (New York: Bantam, 1969).

(The conversations serve to illuminate the differences among the characters, but no character ever changes the opinions of another.) In fact, a good deal of the text consists of these interruptions, which provide the retrospective biographies of the important characters.

Just as the narrated events are located specifically in time, they are also located specifically in space. The events of The First Circle take place at the Mavrino Institute and in Moscow. The Institute is a research facility, in which the workers are all prisoners who have been selected because of their specialized knowledge. The events in Cancer Ward take place in a regional hospital, in particular in the cancer wing, and in the neighboring city of Tashkent. In both novels there is a contrast between ordinary social life, in Moscow or Tashkent, and a confined existence with a specific problem, either as prisoner or patient. Similarly, characters of the novels may be divided into two groups: a central group, either in prison or in the hospital, and a peripheral group. The contrast in the location of narrated events is parallel to one of the contrasts among the characters.

Next, consider the way that the events are organized. In The First Circle, there are many events, but there is no single major sequence of events. Volodin makes a phone call and is arrested. Stalin orders a spy-proof telephone. Nerzhin is sent on a transport. Prisoners visit with their wives. There are a dinner party, a Christmas party, and a birthday party. A spy is unmasked. All of these are typical of the location; none is unusual or noteworthy in itself. In Cancer Ward, people become ill and enter the hospital; they are treated; some recover, and some do not. (The time narrated is longer in this novel because the medical treatment itself requires time.) Rather, such sequences as exist are related to a

particular character. In Cancer Ward, for example, the events participated in by Oleg Kostoglotov form the largest string in the novel. These events include his arrival, treatment or lack of treatment, discussions with other characters, two love affairs, and his activities on the day of his discharge. In The First Circle, the character who participates in the greatest number of events is Gleb Nerzhin. But other characters are treated in detail also. The events are not organized in a conventional structure of a plot and subplots. In this respect, the two novels resemble One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.[3]

(This analysis differs from Professor E. J. Brown's in which "Pursuit of the culprit, Volodin, is the slender thread of plot, and around this thread Solzhenitsyn skillfully weaves a rich tapestry of human characters...."[4] If Volodin's story were removed, the remaining 95% of The First Circle would be as coherent as the actual novel.)

The narrative is not organized around a plot, or around the experiences of a particular character. Instead, it forms parallels, where one part of society is juxtaposed with another. At times, it proceeds from bed to bed in a hospital room or prison dorm; at times, from patient to doctor or prisoner to guard; at times it follows a social hierarchy; at times the juxtaposition is based only on a similarity of the time of day.

Although neither novel is built around a plot, each does present the characters with a significant problem, which grows out of the circumstances of the central location. In The First Circle, the central characters are

[3] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, trans. Ronald Hingley and Max Hayward (New York: Bantam, 1963).

[4] Edward J. Brown, "Solzhenitsyn's Cast of Characters," Major Soviet Writers: Essays in Criticism, ed. E. J. Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 351-66.

prisoners. They have scarcely any control over the physical circumstances of their lives. Their imprisonment is the subject of numerous discussions among them, and they respond to it in different ways. Central to their discussions is the idea of inner freedom, as a response to a lack of external freedom. In Cancer Ward, each of the central characters must come to terms with the possibility of his own death from disease. Here, too, there are numerous discussions among the patients, and the central question is, "What Do Men Live For?" This question refers to the title of a short story by Tolstoy,[5] which is discussed by the patients. In this 19th century story, an angel is sent to earth to "...learn what there is in men, and what is not given to men, and what men live by." After living among peasants, the angel learns the three answers: God, to know what one needs for one's body (i.e., how long one will live), and love. As will be shown later, the religious philosophy of the story can not be implemented by most of the 20th century characters, yet the question remains the same.

The various central characters offer different responses to the problem of each novel; among them, there is one, the main protagonist, who is selected not only because he participates in the greatest number of events, but because of the nature of his response to the problem presented; he is able to develop and act from a sense of moral integrity. In these novels, the position taken by this hero includes the following features:

1. Not to advance one's own interest at the expense of another.
2. To avoid making material objects or physical pleasure one's goals, and also to be able to limit one's demands on the external world

[5] Leo Tolstoy, "What Men Live By," The Complete Works of Leo Tolstoy, trans. Leo Wiener (Boston: Dana Estes and Co., 1904) 12, pp. 327-60.

and on other people.

3. To be able to maintain one's own thoughts and feelings, regardless of external circumstances.

4. To accomplish meaningful work.

By these criteria, the main protagonist in The First Circle is Gleb Nerzhin; in Cancer Ward, it is Oleg Kostoglotov.

A prisoner, Nerzhin is offered a chance to work on cryptographical problems associated with Stalin's telephone. He refuses, because it would mean giving up the time and energy he wishes to use to work on his manuscript--on his own ideas. He does so knowing that he will almost certainly be sent from the relative comfort of the sharashka to a labor camp, at a high risk to his own life. Oleg Kostoglotov struggles to avoid a series of hormone injections. He is choosing between a shorter life with sexual feelings and a longer life without them. However, neither does he make sexual gratification a goal per se, nor does he satisfy himself with a merely sexual relationship with the hospital nurse, Zoya. When he decides to leave Tashkent to return to Ush-Terek, his place of exile, he leaves behind a woman whom he truly loves: Dr. Vera Gangart. He renounces her to spare her the difficulties of an unequal marriage: she is a participant in "normal" society; he can never be. At the same time, he renounces the comforts of civilization; he does so in order not to forget "something more important"[6] than his collar size--his own perceptions of the experience of being alive.

In those portions of the narrative which are concerned with the characters' backgrounds, we find that both heroes have three features in common:

[6] Cancer Ward, p. 499.

1. They have seen front line military service.

2. They have been imprisoned in labor camps.

3. They do not adhere to Soviet ideology.

As we shall see, each of Solzhenitsyn's positive heroes is endowed with these features. Each of these background features refers to an experience, not only to an historical event. An important character in The First Circle, an ex-soldier, Schagov, is described as "tried in the fire of war." Front liners, as he says, returned "cleansed by the closeness of death."[7] In the war, people learned to function in the face of certain knowledge of their mortality. In the labor camps, as is shown in One Day, one learns to live without possessions, social position, or a say in one's fate--and to be able to be "almost happy"[8] doing so. The requirement that the hero not adhere to Soviet ideology might be taken as a warning to avoid any rigid ideology, because it often will turn out to be a set of myths that destroy real values.

In both novels and some short narratives, these background features serve as a precondition to a moral response to the central problem. Among the central characters, those who share the background features of the hero also exhibit a moral response; those who do not possess all three features fail in some way to do so. Thus the other central characters are either similar to, or in contrast with, the main protagonist. The development, or lack of development, of their moral character is the main principle by which they are distinguished.

In The First Circle, two of the central characters are similar to

[7] The First Circle, p. 334.

[8] One Day, p. 203.

Gleb Nerzhin: Spiridon and Potapov. Spiridon Yegorov has fought in both the civil war and World War II, and he has been in a labor camp. He is a peasant, not an intellectual, and follows no ideology. He summarizes his moral philosophy for Nerzhin with the Russian proverb, "The wolfhound is right, the cannibal is wrong."[9] That is, it is natural for an animal to kill and devour other animals; it is wrong for a human being to prey on his fellows. Potapov, an engineer, has the same background features. His moral choice, refusing to collaborate with the Germans at the risk of his life, is made simply and calmly. He declines to contradict a previously sworn oath; to violate his own integrity. For both these men, their work is an important part of their lives.

Three of the central characters, Rubin, Sologdin, and Doronin, fail to meet Nerzhin's moral standards. None of them possesses all three background features: Rubin is a devout communist; neither Sologdin nor Doronin has seen military service. Rubin agrees to cooperate with the KGB by identifying tape recorded voices, knowing the imprisonment which awaits the man he identifies. In this case, the author explicitly develops Rubin's ideology as the factor which prevents him from perceiving the actual moral choice in the situation: according to his dialectical reasoning, he choses to assist the "positive forces of history"[10] rather than to avoid harming someone who is personally brave and worthy, in Rubin's own judgement. Sologdin agrees to use engineering skills to serve Stalin's interests--the interests of the system which is oppressing him and others--to develop a spy-proof telephone. He does so hoping to advance his own interest--

[9] The First Circle, p. 466.

[10] The First Circle, p. 226.

to obtain his release from prison. Sologdin is a pragmatist. Doronin also collaborates by agreeing to spy on his fellow prisoners. He comes up with the Machiavellian plan of working also as a counterspy: he will unmask other spies for the benefit of his fellow prisoners. To carry out this scheme, he passes on what he thinks is a harmless bit of information--that Nerzhin has a copy of Yesenin's poems. Nerzhin is deprived of the book; thus he is indirectly harmed by Doronin. And the scheme itself fails; Doronin will be sent to a labor camp.

One other central character, V. M. Pryanchikov, does not confront any moral choice during the course of the novel. Although he is the same age as Nerzhin, he is described as "young," "boyish," and "with the clean look of youth."[11] He has so far been able to avoid confronting moral issues, and, like Dyomka in Cancer Ward, who is asking the others about life rather than expounding his own philosophy, he will presumably be confronting moral questions later in his life.

In Cancer Ward, Kostoglotov is the only character who fully responds to the problem of the novel--to decide what to live for in the face of the danger of impending death. None of the other central characters shares with him all three background features mentioned above, and none is able satisfactorily to confront his disease. Rusanov clings to the hope of a miracle, and leaves the hospital with the delusion that he is cured, when in fact he has less than a year to live. A similar character, Maxim Chaly, simply gets drunk. Both of these men are crude materialists; Rusanov is a primitive bureaucrat, Chaly is a boorish schemer. Another character, Yefrem Podduyev, is the one who raises the question, "What do men live

[11] The First Circle, pp. 17-18.

by?" He is unable to answer it, and finally retreats to a morbid, gloomy depression. Aleksei Shulubin considers himself an ethical socialist, someone who pursues "values directed toward the mutual illumination of human souls."[12] He has spent his life surrendering his principles, for the sake of his own and his family's survival. As a result, his children have disowned him, and he hasn't the strength left, physical or spiritual, to confront his disease.

One character who seems to find a way to respond to his disease is Vadim Zatsyrko. He is a geologist, and attempts to create a meaningful existence by devoting himself to his scientific work, in spite of the pain of his disease. This fails him, however, as his disease progresses; he loses his strength and consequently, his interest in his work.

There is also a group of patients who are not so well developed as to provide background information or to espouse an individual response to cancer and the threat of death. These characters--Sibgatov, Ahmadjan, Azovkin, Egenberdiev, and Mursalimov--are members of Asian ethnic minorities, and rely on their traditional religion. In the face of death, they practice acceptance. They are an example of practice of the values referred to in the Tolstoy story--values which could no longer be effective for the 20th century Russian characters for the following reason: the Russian Orthodox religion, which had been the central religion in the Russian state for centuries, was systematically wiped out over a fifty year period. The culture and religion of the Asian regions was left relatively undisturbed, as marginal and therefore less dangerous. It is impossible to adopt overnight a tradition which has not existed for fifty years.

[12] Cancer Ward, p. 379.

Thus the central characters are organized on the basis of parallels; the main protagonist embodies the seven features and is able to maintain his integrity. Some other characters are positive parallels of the hero; in others, the moral response is absent or defective, and thus they are negative parallels.

In addition to the central characters discussed above, each novel has a group of "peripheral" characters who are not in confinement, and who therefore do not face the problem of the work, imprisonment or cancer, directly. They are all somehow related to the central location. In Cancer Ward, the peripheral characters are medical workers: Doctors Oreschenkov, Gangart, and Lev Leonidovich, and the nurse, Zoya. In The First Circle, some of the peripheral characters are in the power structure which controls the prison, others work at the prison, others are related to the prisoners. Some of these characters are treated in as great a depth as are the central characters; their personal histories and the concerns of their day-to-day lives are presented in detail as the narrative progresses. None of the peripheral characters is subjected to the severe test that the central characters must face; none of them completely faces or resolves the central moral issue of the novel; therefore, none can be a positive hero. For example, when Volodin telephones a warning to Dr. Dobroumov, he is acting unselfishly, despite his knowledge of the danger to himself. However, this is just the beginning of his moral struggle; his real test will come after the full cycle of imprisonment and labor camp; how he will respond is not shown in this novel.

In each novel, some of the peripheral characters serve the function of impeding the protagonist's effort. In The First Circle, these are members of the hierarchy which controls the prison, from the guards to Stalin

himself. In Cancer Ward, paradoxically, Dr. Dontsoya's treatment of Kostoglotov's cancer threatens to deprive him of his feelings, and thus impedes his wish to experience life fully.

Toward the end of each novel, the circumstances of one of the peripheral characters change so that he or she must now face the novel's central problem. Volodin is arrested; Dr. Dontsova develops cancer. These characters move from everyday society towards the central problem of the work; it is not stated how well or badly they will do.

To summarize, these novels present a portrait of a society, including the experiences of individuals, physical environment, and social institutions, at a particular place and time. The bulk of the narrative is concerned with the history and experience of each of the individual characters. The organization of the narrative functions to present a "snapshot" of a society, by moving from one part of that society to another.

The novels present the characters in parallel, and show the differing responses of individual human beings to a common situation. Each work presents a specific problem to a central group of characters, and describes their responses, not in terms of a solution to the problem--imprisonment or cancer--but in terms of to what extent the individual can maintain his moral integrity in the face of difficult circumstances. Despite the oppressive nature of the institutions there is a grain of optimism, in that the main protagonist is successful at this task.

The central concept of this analysis is to show, in both novels, the struggle of an individual to maintain his integrity as a human being against some threat, in the context of the individual's existence as a member of society. The seven features common to the main protagonists reflect the author's belief as to the necessary conditions for a positive outcome of

the struggle, for man of the 20th century. Other central characters fail in the struggle or do not engage in it. The threat itself may be natural or come from the peripheral characters. In The First Circle, the source of evil in the novel is Stalin. The portrait of Stalin in this work is a caricature, not a depiction of an actual person.[13] Its function in the novel is to provide an element against which the protagonists struggle: irrational, powerful, destructive social forces. In Cancer Ward, the main threat is natural; the objective science of the doctors is an impediment to the protagonist. Stalin is represented in this novel in the closing image of the "evil man" who arbitrarily blinds a Rhesus monkey at the zoo.[14] The existence of evil in society is muted in this novel, but still present. It is no doubt true that Stalin did a lot of harm when he was in power; yet in both novels, the attempt is not specifically to document and evaluate that damage, but rather to show how much the human spirit can accomplish in physically and morally unbearable circumstances.

[13] See Gary Kern, "Solzhenitsyn's Portrait of Stalin," The Slavic Review, 33, No. 1 (March, 1974), 1-22.

[14] Cancer Ward, pp. 506, 532. See also Solzhenitsyn's comment that the man was "meant to symbolize Stalin," p. 555 of the Bantam edition.

Chapter Two: Shorter Works

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich shares several properties with Cancer Ward and The First Circle. The time duration of the narrated events is about eighteen hours--short even for a novella. The events occur in a single location in which the main protagonist is confined: a slave labor camp. The events are typical of the location, and are not organized to form any significant plot. They are presented in a single sequence which reflects the time of the protagonist's day. As in the novels, there are interruptions in which the characters' backgrounds are presented. As Professor K. Pomorska has pointed out, a small unpredictable change in an ordinary event may have the consequence that Ivan Denisovich's life is threatened. For example, he spends a few extra minutes in bed in the morning, and an unexpected guard threatens to send Ivan to the punishment cell. Or, a degree difference in temperature will decide whether or not he must work outdoors in the Siberian cold. So there is a contrast between marked events, which endanger the protagonist, and unmarked events, which do not. The protagonist has no control over the outcome of these threats; the fact that he survives the day at all is simply a matter of luck. The reason that his day is "almost happy"[1] is that he retains the status quo--the existing conditions of imprisonment--and does not suffer the alternative fate--worse conditions with a high risk of death.[2]

[1] One Day, p. 203.

[2] I am grateful to Prof. Pomorska for allowing me to refer to her paper, "On the Structure of Modern Prose: Chekhov and Solzhenicyn." (To be published in Poetics and Literary Theory, September, 1976.)

The slave labor camp environment is more severe than the situation which the novels' protagonists face, since here the inmates lack the relative physical comfort of the hospital or sharashka. And in the novels, the protagonists have both the time to consider philosophical issues, the intellectual capacity to do so, and also the option to make choices which affect their lives. For both Kostoglotov and Nerzhin, survival itself is a secondary consideration compared to a moral choice; examples are Nerzhin's decision not to work in the cryptography group, and Kostoglotov's decision not to accept hormone treatments. To some extent, they control their own fate. In One Day, the hero can make no such significant choices overtly, yet he does make them, although they are reduced to a minimum, and camouflaged by the daily routine. This allows him to maintain the same moral values as the heroes of the novels.

First, note that he possesses the background features: he has fought at the front in World War II; he has, so far, survived for eight years in a slave labor camp, and he is not a communist. (In fact, he is not an intellectual, and follows no ideology at all.)

Second, in his response to the conditions of the slave labor camp, Ivan Denisovich embodies the requirements for moral integrity listed above for the novels. The first was not to advance one's interest at the expense of another. Shukhov is not one of those "fellows who squealed to the screws,"[3] despite the fact that in the camp, this was the only way of securing privileges. When he does want something from another prisoner, such as tobacco, or part of a food parcel, he trades for it, offering real value, such as cash, a place in line, or clothing repair in return. He instructs

[3] One Day, p. 2.

his family not to send food parcels, because of the expense to them. The protagonist's goals in the camp are to survive--there can be no others. Yet when he ponders what he might do after being released, he rejects the possibility of making stenciled carpets, work which requires no skill, despite the fact that people in his town were making good money at the trade. He is not a materialist, and would seek work which required the use of his skills, such as carpentry, because "easy money doesn't weigh anything."[4] There are two specific areas in which Ivan Denisovich is able to maintain his independent values: eating and working. In the dining hall, despite the pressures of starvation-level rations, he savors each mors l of food, and deliberately takes the time to remove his hat before eating. In fact, "he would never eat with it on."[5] Observing the traditional sign of respect of removing his hat is a way for him to maintain his inner values against the demands of hunger. Although he has no choice about working, he does have a choice between shirking and committing himself to the job. He chooses to commit himself to working on the wall; he chooses to do a sloppy job washing the wardroom floor. In both cases, Ivan Denisovich is able to recognize his options and maintain his own values. In a situation devoid of external freedom, in which he has no control over his fate, he can nevertheless maintain his inner freedom. Finally, Shukhov's dedication to meaningful work is obvious both at the construction site and in his thoughts of what to do after his release.

Thus the hero of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich resembles, in his life history and his moral achievement, the heroes of Cancer Ward and

[4] One Day, p. 48.

[5] One Day, p. 16.

The First Circle. The heroes of all three works embody the same list of features, despite the difference in the situations which they face, and despite the fact that Ivan Denisovich can only operate in an even more restricted area of choice.

"Matryona's House"[6] and the other short stories to be considered are of a different genre from either the novels or the novella. In these works, there is no confinement which presents the problem with which the protagonist struggles. Also, the short stories in a classical way include some focal events which have a specific conclusion during the narrative. Thus the stories do not have the apparent plotless construction of the longer works. Yet they share the basic organization of time with the novels.

In this first story, the narrative is framed by an introduction and conclusion which are presented by the narrator alone. Within this frame, the time of the story is built on the same system as the novels and One Day: a narrative interrupted by flashbacks. In this case, the system is varied in that the narrated events cover six months, and there is a single, very important flashback, in which Matryona describes her past. The events include the narrator's search for "the very heartland of Russia,"[7] his choice to move in with Matryona, her way of life, the (focal) events which lead to her death, and the villagers' reaction after her death.

In this story, there is no confinement or disease with which the

[6] All of the short stories discussed here may be found in Stories and Prose Poems, trans. Michael Glenny (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971). Page references are to this edition. More idiomatic translations of "Matryona's House," "An Incident at Kretchetovka Station," and "For the Good of the Cause" may be found in Fifty Years of Russian Prose, ed. K. Pomorska (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971), Volume 2.

[7] Stories, p. 3.

protagonist must deal. Instead, the antagonist is materialism, which is presented both as a social and an individual phenomenon. Socially, there is the villagers' contempt for Matryona's non-acquisitive nature; also, the narrator, in the concluding section, contrasts the villagers' materialism with Matryona's righteousness. Individually, there is Faddey's greed for property which motivates him to dismember Matryona's house, and which initiates the sequence of events which leads to her death. This individual level of conflict is underscored by the narrator's "vivid image of [Faddey]... brandishing his ax at Matryona."[8] Finally, it is the train, product of material progress, which actually kills Matryona, the bearer of traditional Russian values.

Neither the narrator nor Matryona, individually, fullfills the requirements for protagonist which exist in the novels and One Day. However. taken together, they both do so. The narrator does possess the background features. He has served at the front, he has been in a labor camp for "a little matter of ten years,"[9] and he is not a communist. Early in the story, he chooses to live with Matryona rather than in greater physical comfort with another villager. Later, he stands up to Faddey's demand that his son be promoted in school, because it "would be a betrayal of all my work and the ethics of my profession."[10] And in the conclusion of the story, the narrator fully adopts the values which Matryona has embodied in the narrative. Yet he can not, alone, be the main protagonist, because he is more of an observer of the action than a participant, and because the central

[8] Stories, p. 30.

[9] Stories, p. 3.

[10] Stories, p. 27.

conflict with Faddey and the villagers is engaged in by Matryona.

Matryona, on the other hand, fails to carry two of the background features: military service and imprisonment. She does embody the moral values carried by the novels' heroes: she will not harm another person, she does not seek to accumulate material possessions or seek personal pleasure, she is able to maintain her values independently of her neighbors' materialism, and she chooses to spend her time working whenever she is well enough to do so.

Thus in this story, the function of the main protagonist is split between two characters. In addition to serving as protagonist, Matryona fulfills one more related role typical of Solzhenitsyn's fiction: she is a part of a peasant-intellectual pair*, and as such, is a link to the Russian religious past.

Matryona, like Ivan Denisovich and Spiridon (in The First Circle), is a Russian peasant. These people are not educated, and unlike Nerzhin or Kostoglotov, they do not spend time contemplating the morality of their options. Their decisions are taken almost spontaneously, without lengthy deliberation. Ivan Denisovich will consider his options and know what his choice is. When Nerzhin asks Spiridon for a moral philosophy, the response is a proverb,[11] not an intellectualized code. These peasants are much closer to a "natural condition" than the other heroes.

However, where Tolstoy (in "What Men Live By") or Turgeniev (in "Living Holy Relics"[12]) present the peasant as an unflawed, naturally

[11] Cancer Ward, p. 466.

[12] Ivan Turgenev, "Living Holy Relics," "First Love" and Other Tales, trans. David Magarchack (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1968).

* Such as Matryona- Ignatich in this story, and Spiridon-Nerzhin in The First Circle; this continues the tradition of Karataev-Bezukhov in War and Peace and Lukerya-narrator in "Living Holy Relics."

virtuous person, Solzhenitsyn takes a more realistic view. In section 61 of The First Circle, Nerzhin goes to Spiridon, and learns that the peasants have "no homespun superiority," that they are "no more firm of spirit," that in fact most of them lack "that personal point of view which becomes more precious than life itself."[13]

In Solzhenitsyn's fiction, the role of the peasant is effectively demystified. What remains are people who, being relatively unsophisticated, are closer to what Solzhenitsyn sees as innate human values. In his letter to three students, he says that everyone has an internal sense of justice, that "convictions based on conscience are as infallible as the internal rhythm of the heart."[14] When Gleb Nerzhin meets Spiridon, he realizes that his work will be the development of his "inner self," in order to become himself "a tiny particle of [his] own people."[15]

Both these pairings of an intellectual and a peasant may be distinguished from the pairings of the 19th century works. In them, the peasant was simply a paragon. In Solzhenitsyn's work, the intellectuals appreciate and learn from the peasant, but finally end up relying on their own, innate sense of value.

Matryona's role as a link to the past is seen in another of the narrator's images: "that blue, white, and golden July of 1914: the sky of a world still at peace, floating clouds, and the peasants busily gathering the ripe harvest."[16] That is, pre-industrial, agrarian society, with its religious

[13] The First Circle, pp. 448-52.

[14] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "A Letter to Three Students," in Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record, ed. Leopold Labedz (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973), pp. 151-52.

[15] The First Circle, p. 452.

[16] Stories, p. 29.

values. Essentially, Matryona is in the tradition of the virtuous saint-martyr, although she was not "a fervent believer."[17] She is meek and humble, passive rather than assertive, and in the traditional sense, practices non-resistance to evil. This is particularly clear when she allows Faddey to take the extra room from her house; although she knows that he is motivated by greed, Matryona does not resist. Her acquiescence and even voluntary cooperation in this lead directly to her death. In Russian Orthodoxy, these traditions go back to the 11th century saints, Boris and Gleb. These princes were the first saints canonized by the Russian Church; they both had not offered resistance to their murder, and were seen as "holy 'sufferers.'"[18] And Matryona is directly linked to the canon of the saints when she is described as being "the righteous person without whom, as the saying goes, no city can stand."[19]

This linking of past and present is central to two other short pieces, "Zakhar-the-Pouch" and "The Easter Procession." In these works, there are no individual characters involved in conflicts. The first recounts a visit to Kulikovo Field, the site of a battle between the Russians and Mongols in 1380. The battle was between "Holy Russia" and the "heathen Mussulman."[20] The visit begins one afternoon and lasts until the next morning. During the story, the narrator repeatedly evokes the past, examining the battlefield and "seeing" past events. He comments several times on disrespect

[17] Stories, p. 23.

[18] George P. Fedotov, The Russian Religious Mind: Kievan Christianity (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1946), pp. 94-110.

[19] Stories, p. 52.

[20] Stories, p. 135.

shown by vandals for the monument and the church which commemorate the battle. Zakhar, the keeper of the field, treats all visitors harshly at first, for fear that they might be new vandals. At the end, he is described as "the Spirit of the Field" and "like a close friend."[21] This story is built on a positive evocation of Russia's Christian heritage into the present, with an undercurrent which parallels past and present anti-religious vandalism. At first, past and present alternate, finally, they merge.

"The Easter Procession" is built on a contrast between contemporary believers and scoffers. The story alternates between descriptions of one group and the other. The believers are old, frightened, few in number. The scoffers are young, rowdy, disrespectful, and encouraged by the police and the government. Again, valuable past traditions are threatened.

The previous works we have considered have in common the main protagonist's success in maintaining his moral integrity. In two short stories, "An Incident at Kretchetovka Station" and "The Right Hand," the main protagonist has the inner potential to behave morally, but is not successful. The first of these stories is located at a railroad station, where the protagonist, Lieutenant Zotov, is assistant to the station commandant. The time is during World War II, a few hours on the evening of October 30, 1941. As in the novels and "Matryona's House," frequent flashbacks extend the information-bearing capacity of the story.

The struggle centers on Zotov's attempts to get his job done well, and to avoid things which might impede this effort. Although he has a good moral

[21] Stories, p. 150.

potential, Zotov does not correspond directly with the heroes of the novels. It is important to note that he lacks all three background features: he has not fought at the front, he has never been in a labor camp, and he is a devout communist. Zotov fails to embody the first requirement for moral integrity: he harms another person. In the "incident" referred to in the title, which is the focal event of the story, he arrests--and thus effectively destroys--an innocent man. However, he passes the other tests. He is not interested in material possessions, he does not seek physical comfort, he is independent of others, and he is dedicated to his work. In the story, he corrects other's mistakes, works hard to complete the damage report, goes out of his way to help soldiers who are passing through. He avoids office gossip and women's invitations, and eschews personal luxuries like a real zealot. For Zotov, his job is not limited to dispatching trains at the station, but extends to being part of the war effort and to building communism. He devours the war news, and goes beyond the efforts of the average party member, in studying Das Kapital on his own time.[22] With all his devotion to Soviet ideology, Zotov is not like Rusanov in Cancer Ward, but more like Rubin in The First Circle: he is entangled in an ideological trap. The story shows how his dedication to Soviet ideology causes an otherwise moral man to destroy someone else.

The key passage here is the one in which Zotov is shown to revere Stalin as "the omniscient, the omnipotent Father and Master."[23] Zotov is actually serious here, in contrast with the narrator's sarcastic references

[22] Solzhenitsyn, in 1941, was doing the same, as he recalls in his essay, "The Smatterers," in From Under the Rubble, ed. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, trans. A. M. Brock et al. (Boston: Little Brown, 1975), p. 239.

[23] Stories, p. 173.

to Stalin in The First Circle.[24] Later, it is precisely at the point at which Tveritinov is ignorant of the name of Stalingrad that "something in Zotov snapped and he suddenly froze."[25] At this point Zotov decides to have Tveritinov arrested. Zotov has previously considered whether or not the man is a spy, and could not decide for sure; in fact, "he had been right in liking him from the first."[26] For Zotov, communism (and devotion to the national cause) function as a replacement for the religion which was destroyed after the revolution; he is reacting to what he perceives as a threat to his "religion"--in a sense, he condemns Tveritinov for blasphemy. This is precisely the case with Rubin: devotion to Soviet ideology is shown to impede a man's human impulses.

In the story, "The Right Hand," a similar situation exists. It is varied in that the ideological block is external to the protagonist.[27] The plot of this story is simply the attempt of the narrator to help another man, a veteran of the revolution, to gain admittance to the hospital, and the failure of that attempt. The attempt is blocked in two ways; first by the admittance nurse, and second by the veteran himself. In both cases, the root of the block is in Soviet ideology, past and present. The nurse

[24] For example, "the Sovereign," p. 2. "Leader of the Peoples," p. 14, or "the Father of Western and Eastern Peoples," p. 51.

[25] Stories, p. 231.

[26] Stories, p. 223.

[27] This story shares several elements with the novel, Cancer Ward. The location is a hospital in Tashkent. The narrator, who is the main protagonist, has been in a labor camp, and is now recovering from cancer. Although no military record is specifically mentioned in the story, and thus the protagonist fails to carry the three background features, we assume that he is, in fact, Oleg Kostoglotov, especially because his attitude of appreciation for life expressed in the opening pages of the story is identical to Kostoglotov's in section 35 of Cancer Ward, entitled, "The First Day of Creation..."

is a Komsomol member; she holds rigorously to hospital regulations--to the official rules, and is indifferent to the veteran's illness. Ironically, she ignores his revolutionary role, despite her membership in the Party.

After the protagonist learns that the veteran, as an important commissar, killed many people during the revolution, the sight of his once murderous, now withered right hand causes the protagonist to become nauseous and give up his attempt to help the man.

In both stories, the protagonist is attempting to follow a spontaneous human impulse to help another man; in both stories, he is blocked by Soviet ideology, either his own or someone else'e.

Another story, "For the Good of the Cause," may be grouped with these two; although there is no single protagonist, there is a group of protagonists whose spontaneous effort is blocked by a greedy individual, who works through the Soviet government bureaucracy, calling his purpose an ideological cause. This story takes place in a contemporary setting: a technical high school, a local Party office, a regional Party office, and a building site. The beginning of the story describes the students' project: they have volunteered their time and labor to work on a new school building, and are eagerly anticipating the move. However, after the building is completed, a visiting committee decrees that their present school is satisfactory. The school principal, Mikheyich, learns that the new building will be taken by a research institute, and it finally becomes clear that Khabalygin, the manager of a local relay factory, has engineered the take-over for his personal aggrandizement. At the story's conclusion, the principal confronts the victorious Khabalygin at the building site. The manifest conflict in the story is simply possession of the new building; the characters may be grouped according to their position on this issue.

On one side, the protagonists, are the students, their teacher, Lydia Georgievna, the principal Mikheyich, and his friend the town Party committee secretary, Grachikov. On the other side are the regional Party committee secretary Knorozov, and the factory manager, Kgabalygin. The group of protagonists do not carry the background features; the teacher is a Party member. However, some moral features embodied in the novels' protagonists are confirmed by this group.

1. The students advance their interest by their own efforts, they are willing to produce what they need for learning. Khabalygin advances his interest by scheming to take what he wants, for his own glory and power.

2. The school's goal is education; material needs are derived from this goal; Khabalygin's goal is purely materialistic.

3. The principal and Grachikov, in this project and during the war, will fight for their principles against authority.

4. The building project and education are meaningful work; scheming is not.

Essentially the conflict, as in the two previous stories, is between spontaneous human acts and values, and materialism and a desire for power, acting through Soviet ideology and the government apparatus. This is expressed in two styles of leadership. One is authoritarian, embodied in Knorozov, who "was in this region what Stalin had once been in Moscow."[28] The other, shown by Mikheyich and his friend, Grachikov, who will "consult the people,"[29] is centered on human values. As Grachikov protests to

[28] Stories, p. 114.

[29] Stories, p. 96.

Knorozov, "Communism will not be built with stones, but with people."[30] The conflict is reflected in the dual meaning of the story's title; in one sense, "cause" refers to the student's goal, for which they freely sacrifice. In another sense, it is the abstract, false "cause," greed masquerading under the guise of ideology, quoted to the principal as a reason for taking the building.

[30] Stories, p. 116.

Chapter Three: Conclusions

The preceding analysis has provided a model for the Solzhenitsyn hero; the seven features include a specific background, and define a response to the issues of the works. In The First Circle, Cancer Ward and One Day, there is a single main protagonist who bears all the features. (In The First Circle, two less developed characters also bear all seven features; these are positive parallels of the main protagonist.) In "Matryona's House," there are two characters who carry all seven features between them. In three short stories, no protagonist carries all the background features. In "An Incident at Kretchetovka Station" and "The Right Hand," the (single) main protagonist is blocked by Soviet ideology; in "For the Good of the Cause" a group of protagonists has the result of their labor taken away, and their spontaneity threatened, by a greedy man, acting through the Soviet apparatus. In all these works, the effort of the protagonist(s) is to maintain and act from certain moral values; the effort is successful in those works where the protagonist has all the background features; it is unsuccessful where he does not. The antagonist to this effort may be man made or natural, and is an expression of the opposition of material versus spiritual values in some form: at times, individual greed; at times, Soviet ideology, expressed as an individual belief or in the Soviet system; or at times, mere existence, if without moral purpose.

The role of religion in these works merits examination. On the one hand, none of the protagonists is a believer in the traditional sense, and they are often contrasted with other characters who are believers. On the other hand, the protagonists at times embody some traditional Russian

Orthodox practices, and the importance of that tradition is stressed in the two short stories, "Zakhar-the-Pouch" and "The Easter Procession." Kostoglotov does not find solace in religious values, as do Sibgatov, Ahmadjan, Azovkin, et al. Ivan Denisovich is contrasted with Alyoshka the Baptist. He rejects the priesthood, heaven and hell, and the importance of Jesus Christ. But he does believe in God,[1] and retains the traditional practice of removing his hat when eating. Matryona is not a believer, and yet she lights the ikon lamp on fast days;[2] above all, she lives in the tradition of the non-resisting saint.

Certain aspects of religion are rejected: the authority of an organized priesthood, mythological explanation for events, belief in existence after death. But some specific traditional practices remain, and especially, traditional values: the importance of the subjective experience of the individual, the need to exert moral effort, the obligation to respect one's fellows as people, to help them, or at least, not to harm them. These values are not unique to the Russian Orthodox tradition, but in Solzhenitsyn's work they are obviously derived from it.

So while the traditional moral authority of the church is no longer effective, some of its values and practices remain. The remnants of traditional religion always appear with the protagonist, in his battle against materialist ideology.

The protagonist is always in conflict with social authority. There may be a direct threat, such as imprisonment, or death. This is the case in The First Circle and One Day. Or the protagonist may have to deal with

[1] One Day, pp. 195-99.

[2] Stories, p. 24.

a bureaucracy. In Cancer Ward, Kostoglotov must argue with the bureaucrat Rusanov, preserve his values against the medical hierarchy, and, after his cure, he is subject to the conditions of his exile. In "Matryona's House," Matryona must expend a great effort to get her pension, and to sustain her way of life against the demands of the collective farm. In "An Incident at Kretchetovka Station," Zotov is unable to get food for people in transit or, finally, information about the man he has condemned. In "The Right Hand," the nurse will not budge from her official procedures; in "For the Good of the Cause," the bureaucracy is the tool for Khabalygin's greed. The medical hierarchy in Cancer Ward offers a subtle impediment. The doctors are working, honestly and with great effort, to preserve Kostoglotov's life. Yet he must struggle against them to preserve his values. The general struggle is with a view of man as an object, whether with destructive or constructive intent; this is true of medicine (in contrast with the doctors at the hospital, the old Doctor Oreschenkov argues for understanding "the patient as a single subject."[3]), and is true in government, where the basic enemy is materialist ideology.

It is interesting that, while in these works the conflict between the individual and social authority is presented with the individual in the right, in his non-fiction statements, Solzhenitsyn at times takes the other side of the same issue. In his Letter to the Soviet Leaders, he accepts the current power and authority of the Kremlin, asking only that it be administered more humanely.[4] In his essay, "As Breathing and

[3] Cancer Ward, p. 425.

[4] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Letter to the Soviet Leaders, trans. Hilary Sternberg (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 67-81.

Consciousness Return," he decries the fact that individuals' protests were allowed to weaken the authority of the U. S. government in prosecuting the war in Viet-Nam.[5] What is significant is not that Solzhenitsyn is inconsistent, but that the same conflict underlies both his fiction and his nonfiction: the tension between the requirements of the individual and the requirements of his society.

The three background features which accompany the successful protagonist do, in fact, reflect the author's life history. (It is also true that the settings for all these works are those which the author has in fact visited.[6]) However, it is more meaningful to ask what relevance these features have in relation to the work itself. That is, as prerequisites for the success of the protagonist in maintaining his subjective integrity. These heroes do not simply follow a correct code of action, or a "right" set of rules; instead, in these works the heroes all have been able to incorporate a certain set of experiences which are of particular importance for 20th century man: the confrontation with the possibility of death as a daily reality; the ability to function on the basis of one's perceptions rather than an ideological creed. All the heroes have necessarily undergone a process of development which requires time; this is not shown in the works but only referred to. The results are shown.

The heroes go through experiences which are strikingly similar to those of the survivors of the Nazi death camps. In interviews with people

[5] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "As Breathing and Consciousness Return," From Under the Rubble, ed. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, trans. A. M. Brock, et al. (Boston: Little Brown, 1975), p. 22.

[6] Natalya Reshetovskaya, Sanya: My Life With Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, trans. Elena Ivanoff (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975).

who actually survived, Terrence Des Pres finds that "Ideologies, moral assumptions, religious beliefs, past identities, previous achievements... crumbled into nothingness...." Thrown back on "the biological basis for life, [the survivor] found life good," and focussed on such simple items as "a helping hand when someone fell, the gift of a coat from someone who had two, a fish head, a bowl of soup, a morning fleck of sunlight...."[7]

Solzhenitsyn's fiction presents, on the one hand, many problems peculiar to the 20th century: a sophisticated technology which has enabled tyranny and mass-murder on an unprecedented scale, materialist ideologies and objective knowledge which threaten the functioning of the individual as an independent entity, the failure of traditional religious forms. In spite of these, there is the protagonist who, with no power or social authority, can find the inner strength not only to survive, but also, first and foremost, to maintain his integrity.

[7] Kevin Starr, rev. of The Survivors: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps, The New Republic, 174, No. 15 (April 10, 1976), pp. 28-29.

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